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The Blakelock Exhibition

SO much interest in and concern for Ralph Albert Blakelock is being manifested in the art world at present that the following story from *The New York Times Magazine* concerning him and the exhibitions of his works at the Reinhardt Galleries seems particularly apropos:

If a phrase or two could determine a man's sanity, Ralph Albert Blakelock might be adjudged sane without further ado, without further inquiry as to whether he should be released from the State asylum at Middletown, where he has been an inmate for sixteen years.

When they told him the other day that there was to be an exhibition of his paintings, the same paintings which he was forced to sell for next to nothing because of his family's dire want and which now sell for many thousands and adorn the chief collections of the country, Blakelock said: "Ah, that is good. But show them on their merits alone. Do not resort to sensationalism to get a crowd to look at them, don't harp on the plight of the man who painted them for the sake of arousing interest."

Surely that was the remark of a sane man, at least of a man having a sane moment, and on the strength of it he would be released by a jury of artists, no matter what the alienists might say.

And, again, when it was suggested to him some time ago that he try to paint some pictures at the asylum to make money for his family, the artist said: "That is not the way to paint pictures, with the thought of the money they will bring. That is the way not to paint pictures." Another verdict of sanity from the artists is the award for that attitude toward art, even on the part of a man held as a lunatic.

So much for some of the sayings of Blakelock that his friends are setting so much store by in their efforts to prove that he is again well and should be restored to life and his family—perhaps to art itself. The things that he has done recently, as compared with his previous conduct, are as promising as the things he has said. For example, he is painting some very good little landscapes, not real Blakelocks to be sure, but such pictures as an art student with a future might do, and in that fact there is proof of a wonderful improvement in the man's condition.

There also has been a great change for the better in the artist's physical condition. His weight has increased from seventy-six to ninety pounds. So Dr. Maurice C. Ashley, Medical Superintendent of the asylum, has begun to have real hopes for the

patient, notwithstanding the fact that Blakelock is now a man sixty-nine years old.

Among the artists who have undertaken to make less miserable the last days of Blakelock, whether he spends them in or out of the asylum, are Elliott Daingerfield, who has recently written an appreciation of some of the greatest Blakelock pictures, together with just a suggestion of the pathetic biography of the painter; and Harry W. Watrous, secretary of the National Academy of Design, who shared his studio with Blakelock years ago when the latter had no means of hiring a studio of his own.

Under the leadership of these two artists a committee has arranged a loan exhibit of twenty or more Blakelocks to be held at the New York Reinhardt Gallery, 565 Fifth avenue. Their purpose is to raise a fund to provide for the care of Blakelock outside the asylum, so that he may live with his wife and children, if it is decided later on to release him, or to at least do something to save Mrs. Blakelock from the poverty she has struggled with for sixteen years, and to give the artist better quarters in the asylum, where he can paint to his heart's content.

The first real experiment with Blakelock himself to see how a touch of freedom will affect him will be tried within a week or so, when Dr. Ashley will bring him to New York and take him to the exhibit of his own pictures. He remembers them all. That was indicated the other day at the asylum when a copy of Mr. Daingerfield's illustrated book was shown to him on the occasion of a call from Mrs. Blakelock. He was delighted to greet his wife, whom he had not seen for two years, for the simple reason that she had not had money enough to pay the fare to Middletown. He showed her some of his pictures that he had painted at the asylum, and gave her several to take home.

Then, after this pathetic little exhibit of the cigar box pictures of the asylum period, they all looked over the Daingerfield book with the copies of the paintings that have given Ralph Albert Blakelock his sure place as one of the great American artists.

He recalled the now famous "The Brook by Moonlight," which, at the recent Catholina Lambert sale, was knocked down for \$20,000 to the Toledo Museum. "I remember now," he said, as they turned to the picture of it in the book, "how I pondered the trunk of that tree for a long time, wondering if I had made it thick enough to support all the mass of top branches and foliage."

That same \$20,000 "Moonlight" is one of his masterpieces that Blakelock will again see in the

original when he comes down to his exhibit on Fifth avenue, for the Toledo Museum had hardly got the picture unboxed when word came of the movement to help the artist and the picture was rushed back to New York as a loan. Another great painting that Blakelock saw reproduced in the Daingerfield book, and which he will see at the Reinhardt Gallery, was the Blakelock "Moonlight" now owned by ex-Senator William A. Clark, who bought it at the Evans sale for \$13,900.

Blakelock once set out from the Watrous studio with that picture under his arm, determined to sell it for \$50. His eighth child had been born that day and there was no money and little food in the house. Incidentally, the rent was so long overdue that the dispossession stage had been reached, a familiar situation in the Blakelock family. But there happened to be the new baby this time and something had to be done, hence the move to sell for \$50 the picture that was to bring \$14,000. But Watrous averted the disaster in part. When he saw what picture Blakelock had under his arm he begged and pleaded with him not to throw it away. Blakelock insisted on having \$50 and getting it in the quickest way he knew how.

"I'll give you five hundred for it if you will wait three days," said Watrous.

"All, right, Harry, it's yours, but will you let me have five dollars today on account?"

Watrous did. Then he paid the balance and soon afterward sold the picture to the collector for six hundred and gave Blakelock the extra hundred. That was probably the highest price Blakelock ever got for a picture. The lowest price that any one recalls now was \$100 for thirty-three pictures, \$3.03 apiece. Elliott Daingerfield vouches for that story.

"There used to be a junk dealer, Robert Fullerton, over on Third avenue, near Eighteenth street," said Mr. Daingerfield, "who would buy anything from old bottles to a grand piano. One of his many specialties was paintings from students and poor artists. I was a student then, and more than once found it convenient to let the junk dealer have a study or sketch for the two or three dollars he was willing to pay. One day when I was in there he took me into a back room and showed me thirty-three pictures in one stack. 'Ralph Blakelock painted every one of them,' he said, 'and I got the lot for \$100.'"

It was on the birth of the eighth child that Watrous had helped save the day, and Blakelock had said in jesting reply to his friend's protest against such a family under such conditions: "Why, Harry, I just had to have a full octave."

But the real crisis came with the one over the octave. The threat to dispossess figures in this story, too. Matters were so desperate a week or so before the end that Mrs. Blakelock sent word to a collector who had bought several of her husband's pictures and begged him to come to the house. He did so, and was told that they must have money or be forced into the street. The collector looked over the artist's unframed pictures (Blakelock could never buy frames) and said there was nothing there he cared for. Then he pointed to a small picture and remarked that that might do if it were larger. He finally agreed to pay \$200 for the same subject repainted on a larger canvas, and Blakelock joyfully accepted the commission.

This is what the collector said when Blakelock arrived with the painting: "Well, I see you didn't hit it off this time. That certainly is not the picture I offered to pay \$200 for. I wouldn't have it in my house." Then he relented and offered much less. Blakelock went home with the picture; the insult had been too much even for him. That is, it was too much for him when it was offered. But it could not compete with the practical starvation at home. He went back to the collector, who now offered a still lower figure, and counted out the money in bills. It was not such a large sum but what any gentleman of a high degree of culture and a lover of the arts might carry it in his pocket for incidentals.

Blakelock took the cash and went home. He showed the money to his wife, counted it carefully, slowly, and then threw it in the kitchen fire. That was the end of Blakelock as a great American artist. He became violent that night. They took him away the next day and in the evening the one over the octave came, a boy.

There are many stories as to just what did come as the last straw to cause the mental collapse of the artist, but the one concerning the burning of the money was told by the wife to Mr. Daingerfield. The stories that surely are not true are those to the effect that Blakelock's downfall was due to dissipation; that he peddled his pictures in saloons for liquor.

"Blakelock was practically a teetotaler," says Harry Watrous, who knew him best. "He never touched drugs. He had no vices of any sort. His was an extreme case of a man who did not know the value of his own work, who had no ability whatever for business, and who certainly did not know the meaning of money. He simply went to pieces under the strain of his mental suffering, due to his never-ending money plights.